

Taking up Ursula Franklin's claim that without unprogrammed silence we are likely to lose spiritual connection, Hudson develops the nuanced argument that spirituality requires the experience of community and that such an experience can be found by sharing ritual moments in either silence or sound with others. (Instructor: Leeore Schnairsohn)

THAT WE MAY HEAR

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Ursula Franklin, in her speech “Silence and the Notion of the Commons,” worries that silence—which she views as integral to the spirituality and the common good of humanity—is being threatened by the harrowing effects of continually advancing technology (439). To Franklin, silence is comparable to any of Earth’s unpolluted elements as an impending casualty of our “technologically mediated society” (440)—it faces annihilation unless we intervene (439).

Franklin harbors a conservative belief on how sound should rightly be perceived. She mourns a waning perception of sound as “ephemeral,” as “coupled to its source,” a view which has become obsolete with the technologically driven ability to establish sound permanently (440). The ephemerality of sound is central to Franklin’s core beliefs. Without it, silence could not permeate the sound environment, or what she calls “the soundscape” (440). Previously, she explains, the soundscape was distinct from the landscape in that it could not be obstructed by unseemly, humanmade creations—sound was experienced, not manipulated. However, much to Franklin’s perturbation, the dimensions of the soundscape have come to almost mirror those of the landscape: just as a landscape can be obstructed by “a horrible building somewhere in front of a beautiful mountain,” the soundscape can be overwhelmed by “modern devices” that “separat[e] the sound from the source” (440).

Ultimately, Franklin’s concern for sound is a smaller piece of her crusade for silence. In addition to being a research physicist and an activist, Franklin was a practicing Quaker. Her experience as a

Quaker, along with her knowledge and understanding of Quaker history, gives her a unique perspective on the idea of silence as a human right and something integral to the common good. This perspective primes her argument that the silence we are entitled to is being ushered away without our consent. Common societal good, in both a functional and spiritual sense, requires an environment that allows for things to happen spontaneously, that allows for the “unappointed, unordained, unexpected, and unprogrammed” in order to develop and be maintained (441). Exactly how this process takes place is not so much explained or outlined but felt throughout the essay. At one point, Franklin describes her experiences in Quaker meetings as one in which thoughts would manifest themselves from the “collective silence” into the minds of individual participants, an exchange she senses as an “uncanny,” “spiritual force” (441).

When I was a child, my own family attended Quaker meetings on a regular basis. I have not reflected on those experiences since our attendance dropped off when I was six or seven, but as I do now, through the lens of Franklin’s values, several things strike me about the silent meditation that took place. I remember the old man with a yellow patch on his neck who struggled to speak (I later surmised this was the result of the surgical removal of his larynx), and yet speak he did, out of the collective silence. I remember that the other children and I remained quiet despite our young, excited vitality—even at that age, we could sense the intrinsic power of that silence. To me, that collective silence came to represent a certain wisdom that I aspired to one day obtain. I wanted to have the same connection to it that those old, enlightened few who spoke seemed to have. Communal silence embodies that inherently difficult-to-describe but immediately felt sense of power and knowledge, that unseen but alive substance that Franklin evokes in her writing, which can only and precisely be described as spiritual.

But the spiritual aspects of sound and silence cannot be said to resonate, in a benevolent way, with every individual. In “Salvation,” Langston Hughes recounts a childhood experience in a spiritual soundscape that causes him to fabricate meaning rather than find it. As the members of his local church gather up the youth and consign themselves to “bring the young lambs into the fold,” Hughes waits

faithfully for Jesus to reveal himself out of the silence—but to no avail (203). He writes, “The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting—but he didn’t come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me” (204). He seeks salvation not only from his own imperfections, but from the berating, chaotic voices that assault him: like Franklin, Hughes yearns for a spiritual force to reach out from the silence and deliver him from the tempest of the soundscape. However, unlike for Franklin, silence *fails* him. His religious experience starkly opposes Franklin’s: instead of a communal silence, it is an individual silence battered by outside communal noise. In his inward search for an unprogrammed connection with Christ, while trying to resist the pressure of projecting a programmed and fake connection, he doesn’t find spirituality. Instead, he is left with a silent shame, which festers into an agonized sound that escapes him in a lonely cry that he cannot stifle, ironically contrasting his congregation’s “joyous singing” (205). Hughes’s reaction evidences a distinct lack of spirituality; his having the faith to look inward in silence, to reach for the power and knowledge unseen, avails only emptiness. Franklin rages against the manipulation of the public soundscape by privatized elements and praises the virtues of a soundscape that belongs to “the commons” (443), but Hughes would contend that a community imposing its voice on an individual is as fundamentally wrong as a privatized voice imposed on a community. Depriving one’s own senses as a religious experience in the silence, one can find something spiritual, but one can also find nothing. To understand why, perhaps we must know what spiritual meaning can be found, or not, by embracing one’s senses instead.

Before technology allowed for aspects of the soundscape to be so easily made permanent, Mark Twain struggled to negotiate the loss of meaning within his personal landscape. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain reflects upon his close relationship with the Mississippi River, which he imagines as a grand, ever-evolving book written in its own unique language (76). He entertains no thoughts of restraint in consuming the river’s words, stating that “there was never a page that was void of interest, never one that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip, thinking you could find higher

enjoyment in some other thing” (76). But tragically, as Twain masters the intricate language of the river, “the beauty, the grace, the poetry” cease to appear to him; he begins to see it only in the terms of its “usefulness” to his profession (77). Twain reaches the same unmeaningful emptiness by exploring the seen that Hughes reaches by exploring the unseen.

Comparing the spirituality that Franklin and I could find in our experiences of silence with the tragic emptiness that awaited Twain and Hughes reveals a striking variable in these experiences: community. Hughes lacked a community to join him in silence, and Twain rejected input from his fellow humans in favor of what nature alone could express. Perhaps attempting to perfectly balance the embrace or the deprivation of one’s senses is the wrong step, or an incomplete step, in the search for spiritual meaning. Instead, perhaps unity with one’s community must be brought into harmony, be it in silence or not. What these experiences point to together, which they could not by themselves, is a need to not only look inwards to the self, but also outwards to the connectedness of the commons. We must draw spirit from the unseen and unheard through interconnected and communal experiences.

WORKS CITED

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